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## We Should Heed Research into What's Happening in Rural Areas

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This villa near Florence has been in Helena Bonham Carter’s family for almost 70 years. Christopher Lamb gets a grand tour as the property goes on sale for €4m

In the 1985 film *A Room with a View*, Helena Bonham Carter threw open a window in Florence and became an instant A-list movie star. Away from the cameras, the Oscar-nominated actress has nurtured a lifelong love affair with Tuscany: her family own a home nestled on a hillside above the city.

San Martino, a converted medieval watchtower, is surrounded by olive groves and cypress trees, giving visitors a sense of being in the heart of the Tuscan countryside. Yet the house, which is now on the market for €4.07m, is just five minutes’ drive from central Florence.

It has been in the family for decades — Bonham Carter, 50, stayed there as a teenager while filming the Merchant Ivory adaptation of EM Forster’s classic novel. She played Lucy Honeychurch, an innocent abroad who falls madly in love with George Emerson (Julian Sands) after he kisses her dramatically in a poppy field on the outskirts of Florence. In fact, *A Room with a View* was something of a family affair: her mother, Elena, and her grandmother Hélène Propper de Callejon both appeared as extras in the movie.

The property, which sprawls over 465sq metres, with eight bedrooms and an outdoor pool, has been in the family since 1947 and is currently owned by Elena, her brother Felipe Propper de Callejon and their cousin David Pryce-Jones; Helena has been a regular visitor all her life, often coming on holiday with her children. The family joke is to put a sign saying “A Room with a View” outside her bedroom door whenever she visits.

Recently, however, they have decided to sell the Italian pile, which offers vistas of the rooftops of Florence everywhere you go — even in the downstairs loo.

“We see it as a sanctuary where you feel safe,” Elena says, “and it is just so incredibly beautiful. “You look out and there is this extraordinary scene of different greens thanks to the sea of olive groves below.”

The decision to sell has been painful, but is being forced on the family both by the ages of its owners and by the inheritance laws of Italy, under which all children must inherit an equal share of any property their parents hand on to them. “All three of us have passed the 80-year departure point,” explains Pryce-Jones, a writer and historian.

“If our children inherit, there will be eight owners, while in the following generation, there are 23 grandchildren. We thought it was unfair to leave it like that.

“We’ve put it off as much as we can, but it would be risky to put it off a bit more. Of course it’s sad, and I hate change, but life is like that.”

Anyone giving up San Martino, in the prestigious suburb of Arcetri, south of the city centre, would feel sad. As Elena puts it: “How does one let go of a bit of paradise?”

From Florence’s railway station, your journey to the house takes you past Piazzale Michelangelo, a tourist honeypot with panoramic views over the city, then beneath the striking Romanesque basilica of San Miniato al Monte, one of the



**Ivory tower** When Helena Bonham Carter stays in the Tuscan home, the family joke is to put a sign on her bedroom door saying ‘A Room with a View’, referring to her breakthrough role in the Merchant Ivory film

most scenic points in the whole of Italy.

The route takes you near Villa Il Gioiello, once home to Galileo, and the nearby astronomical observatory before you reach San Martino along a quiet country lane. On foot, it takes half an hour from the house to reach the Ponte Vecchio, the famous 16th-century bridge over the River Arno, lined with jewellers and art dealers.

At first sight, the property appears modest, even nondescript, but step inside its shaded medieval courtyard, surrounded by lemon trees, and you’ve arrived in a secret oasis. It is here that the family have given birthday parties and wedding receptions, and

whiled away many summer evenings.

Although the structure is 14th-century, the house has ancient origins, as demonstrated by the Roman pillar in the courtyard. Over the years, it existed in many guises, including a spell as a convent, before being turned into a villa in the 1920s. There’s a terrace that leads into a landscaped garden, with roses and a walkway that takes you past manicured hedges, behind which you’ll find the large swimming pool.

Inside, San Martino is full of rustic charm. Slightly worn carpets, a fireplace and red sofas sit beneath vaulted ceilings. The atmosphere is, naturally, bohemian: English country home meets Tuscan

farmhouse. Indeed, part of the property was once used as a cowshed, in the days when this was a farm. Pryce-Jones remembers old farmers telling him how they used to walk their cattle from San Martino to drink from the river.

Above all, it feels like somewhere that has been loved over the generations. There is a lived-in charm to the place, no doubt thanks to the many family holidays when big groups descended and lived cheek by jowl, bedding down on inflatable mattresses.

Much of this is documented in the visitors’ book, which, suitably, sits next to a copy of *Vogue* with Helena on the glossy cover. One entry, from August 1984, is signed “Helena



Bonham Carter and friends”. There are pictures of the actress, including one of her on the steps below Florence’s *Duomo*, and of the director Tim Burton, her former partner, who was also fond of San Martino.

As well as a holiday retreat, the house has been an inspiration — little wonder, given that the region produced founding fathers of the Renaissance such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Brunelleschi. Pryce-Jones, who is an expert on

the Arab world and a former literary editor of *The Spectator* and the *Financial Times*, penned a number of his books in the peaceful study, including his recent memoir *Fault Lines* (published by Criterion). It includes stories about San Martino and the woman who brought it, Mary Wooster — his grandmother and Helena’s great-grandmother.

Also known as Mitzi or Marie-Cécile, Mary was the extremely wealthy only daughter of the Austro-Hungarian industrial magnate

Baron Gustav Springer. She was also a powerful, dynamic character who spoke many languages, and lived in the house until her death in 1978.

She purchased San Martino to help her second husband, Frank Wooster, who had been a prisoner of war in the First World War and suffered from bad health — the air around Florence was supposed to be beneficial. He married Mary after the death of her first husband, Eugene Fould-Springer. Frank knew PG Wodehouse, and apparently inspired the surname of the novelist’s feckless central character Bertie.

Given the political instability in Italy just after the Second World War, it wasn’t straightforward for outsiders to buy property there. “When she bought San Martino, communism was on the rise and someone had painted a hammer and sickle on the front door,” Pryce-Jones says. “Granny was warned that the communists might attempt to seize the house, but she replied, ‘I’d like to see them try.’”

Despite this, Frank and Mary managed to create an eclectic, cosmopolitan world in Florence, thanks mainly to her wide circle of friends. They included Bernard Berenson, one of the world’s leading art critics, and Sir Harold Acton, an Italophile scholar, poet and connoisseur who was the consummate aesthete of his generation.

“Granny knew everyone there was to know,” Pryce-Jones says. “Harold was a big family friend — I remember him coming over and singing Chinese songs, as he had spent some time in Beijing before the war.”

In true Grand Tour-era style, the house is today looked after by full-time staff, one of whom lives in a cottage next to the main house, in order to care for the gardens and ensure it is maintained properly.

While a refurbishment took place in the 1990s, there is scope for work to be done upstairs on the bedrooms and bathrooms, which look as though they have not been updated for many years. On the plus side, one of the main bedrooms has a private terrace that offers the best view in the house, where you can see for miles into the distance: a mixture of green and the rooftops of Florence.

Today, it is no longer the English gentry who are buying up desirable properties in Florence. Buyers come from all over the world, and are likely to be drawn to San Martino because it is in one of the most sought-after areas of Tuscany. A few years ago, a Russian oligarch brought a nearby castle for €18m — the crane helping to renovate the property can be seen on the horizon.

“Clients can be almost any nationality,” says Jeremy Onslow-Macaulay, managing director of Casa & Country, which is marketing San Martino. “In the past year, we have dealt with Middle Eastern, French, Lebanese, Brazilian and Indian buyers, as well as the British and Americans who have for so long loved this city.”

While the family have put the property on the open market, there is a hope that one of the members of their extended clan might make a bid. There’s even a chance that Helena may not feel ready to tear herself away from the area that made her name.

[casaandcountry.com](#)



**On location** The villa has eight bedrooms, a shady courtyard and a pool, and offers glorious views over Florence



# We should heed research into what's happening in rural areas

Ireland’s rural population has increased by just over 19% in the past 20 years, according to Teagasc, the state research body for the food and agriculture sector. A study, carried out by Dr David Meredith, senior researcher at Teagasc, looked at rural Ireland — its economy and where people are going to live.

Media reports tend to focus on specific components of population decline, especially the headline-grabbing “Can’t even field a GAA team” line, which focuses on young men. Populations comprise more than young men, however, and increases can be found in other age categories, such as the over-55s.

Over the same period it has been interesting to see that the employment patterns of rural men and women diverge. Men (in general) went from agriculture to construction, and have returned to agriculture again.

Women went from professional services (health, education, and so on) to even more professional services. From 1986 to 2011, the number of women in the

workforce rose 145% while the equivalent figure for men was 33%.

Professional services and other job opportunities for women tend to be found in towns and cities, and, as women do not commute as far as men (often for family reasons), they tend to want to live near their employment.

Rural areas have more job opportunities for men, so the challenge now for two-income

households is finding somewhere to live that facilitates two workplaces.

The solutions of “joint accessibility” can be seen in the changing nature of rural areas, especially within commuting distances of towns and cities, which are increasingly almost suburban in form. The majority of babies under one year old live around these towns and cities, as do people with degrees, who

move there for work but then stay.

This growing concentration of people around urban areas makes it challenging for the industrial development authority, IDA Ireland, to bring serious numbers of new jobs to more rural locations. Companies setting up in Ireland have specific needs, and today that means educated, skilled employees, who are to be found in towns and cities. To compound the issue, companies often set up near similar businesses.

Broadband is often touted as the medicine that will cure all ills in rural Ireland, but it won’t. Although high-speed internet is difficult to provide to homes as a result of our dispersed living patterns — on 96,000km of road — evidence has shown that when broadband arrives in rural areas, other services such as banks pull out. This is because of the perception that banking can be done online. Broadband also allows people to shop online, thus bypassing local retailers.

The relocation of services from rural locations will not bother those who can commute or use



A new report looks at population and employment patterns in rural areas

the internet, but it will badly affect those sectors of society who don’t or can’t.

Solving the population and employment issues in rural Ireland is increasingly challenging as its economy is connected to events elsewhere. The factors that cause change in these areas often emanate many thousands of

kilometres away in the boardrooms of large companies seeking efficiencies and in finance houses striving for better returns. Although rural economies may benefit from globalisation, it is not certain whether this will translate into commensurate local benefits. Agriculture is always of critical importance in Ireland. As local

economies integrate with global ones, our agricultural industry will change shape, so we will see fewer but larger and more specialised farms.

This may be the future, with some farms solely producing milk and others producing the fodder that feed those cows, and so on. As about 70% of inputs used in farming are produced in Ireland, this means there are considerable opportunities for suppliers.

The worth of research is often undervalued in Ireland, and especially by politicians, if the findings do not suit the dominant narrative. See the recent first-time buyers grant initiative, which, according to research, even first-time buyers did not want. It went ahead anyway, and my contacts tell me house prices went up — exactly as the research predicted.

Teagasc is to be commended for explaining what is happening in rural Ireland. Hopefully, policymakers will use it to plan for a realistic future, rather than an aspirational one.

**LORCAN SIRR**  
ON THE HOME FRONT